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Тел.: +7(949) 36-707-35

E-mail: jur.conf@donnu.ru; redact@donnu.ru

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Erokhina Yu. V.

CANCEL CULTURE: XENOPHOBIA AND XENOPHILIA ONLINE USING RUSSIA AS AN EXAMPLE

Developing Internet communication technologies are expanding the audience of both global culture broadly as well as Russian culture in particular. The world is conceptualized as multicultural and the cyberspace appears to be mosaic, thus indicating the idea of preserving and encouraging cultural diversity that is contributing to the spiritual enrichment of society. At the same time, digital technologies can have a negative impact by means of altering cultural values and restructuring the system of their coding. To be more specific, it leads to a possibility of an interpretation of a fact being distorted, which is why this article analyzes the instances of xenophobia online and beyond. However, in order to objectify the scientific knowledge on the topic of xenophobia, it would be remiss not to examine xenophilia. Xenophobia and xenophilia are two contrasting phenomena that can have a negative effect on human consciousness, harmful both for the one espousing them and the society as a whole. It is important to identify the mechanisms of their interaction, find a potential balance between them, and determine to what extent «foe» becomes «friend» as a result of cultural adaptation. In this regard, the paper deals with the phenomenon of the cancellation of Russian culture as a manifestation of ethnic xenophobia online and offline. An autobiographical method of research is applied when analyzing the instances of xenophobia directed towards the author in her career as an artist with the purpose of objectification of knowledge on the topic of the cancellation of Russian culture. The semiotic method is used to identify the primary and secondary meanings of the new symbols «Z» and «V» utilized in Russian cultural space. The article also analyzes Russian legal practice and evaluates the prospects of counteracting xenophobia.

Keywords: Cancel culture, Cyberhate, Xenophobia, Xenophilia, Russophobia, Russophilia

1. Introduction.

The Internet expands the space of the unpredictable – the space of information – and simultaneously creates a conventional world, experimenting

with this space and proclaiming mastery over it. Alongside factual and useful data, there exists misleading, negative information in cyberspace. It is a well-known fact that information must meet several criteria: relevance, coverage, currency, and accuracy. However, the World Wide Web makes a lot of these criteria insignificant. The Internet is full of fakes, messages containing violence, profanity, murder, pornography, calls for suicide, incitement of religious and ethnic hatred, xenophobia, etc. The dissemination of negative information is related to the umbrella term «cyberhate», which is used to describe various forms of communication between hate groups with the purpose of attracting new members, forming and reinforcing group identity, coordinating group action, spreading propagandistic ideological messaging and indoctrination, provoking responses within propagandistic campaigns, and attacking social groups and individuals by means of hateful messages¹. T. Quandt and R. Festl note that a large segment of research under the label «cyberhate» has focused on racist and xenophobic groups and their use of email, websites, blogs, and social online networks².

The material used in the present scientific article is divided into the material to be clarified (primarily Internet resources, i. e. mass media and social media) and clarifying material. The rest is control material that can be implemented later and acts as a means to specify and concretize the previously identified trend or pattern. The pattern is being traced gradually and is not only explained by the material provided in the chapter – any additional material is also applicable.

The subject of this study is the phenomenon of cancel culture and related phenomena of xenophobia and xenophilia within the context of Russia.

The analysis that helps define the makeup of examined cultural phenomena and related individual facts and that then separates substantial and insubstantial, which in turn acts as the basis of methodology. The analysis of the ongoing processes of xenophobia, specifically russophobia within the cultural sphere, makes it possible to discern its various stages and contradictory trends. The purpose of the analysis is to understand the elements of cultural phenomena, processes, events, and their study as relatively independent entities. In turn, the qualitative analysis will examine the practices of cancellation of Russian culture within cyberspace and beyond. The combination of observational and descriptive methods delineates the emerging

¹ Quandt T. and Festl R. (2017), p. 1.

² Quandt T. and Festl R. (2017), pp.1–2.

trends in regards to the cancellation of Russian culture and gives insight to its specifics. The amalgamation of the autobiographical and case study method enables the analysis of ethnic xenophobia directed to the author in her career as an artist. The semiotic method is put to use when objectifying the meaning of the symbols «Z» and «V».

It is important to stress that the following logically related categories are being examined: cancel culture, the cancellation of Russian culture, cyberhate, xenophobia, xenophilia, russophobia, and russophilia. The formal-logical division of terms into kinds is necessary, as cancel culture is a general category and the cancellation of Russian culture is merely its part. Cyberhate as an umbrella term includes xenophobia (type) in cyberspace and russophobia (kind), in turn, is a variety of xenophobia. In this instance, cyberhate and the cancellation of Russian culture can be correlated to form and content. At the same time, in order to objectify scientific knowledge on the topic of xenophobia, xenophilia must be examined. Xenophobia and xenophilia are two contrasting phenomena. These states of human consciousness can lead to harmful consequences for people espousing such beliefs and the society as a whole. It is important to determine to what extent «foe» becomes «friend» as a result of cultural adaptation and find balance between the two extremes – xenophobia and xenophilia. Thus the article will consider the examples of interrelation of russophobia and russophilia.

2. Cancel culture, russophobia, and russophilia: theoretical and practical aspects.

One of the main contemporary trends is the phenomenon of cancel culture as a form of ostracism when a person or even entire nations and states are excluded from society. The term is applicable to both the online and offline spaces, ranging from mob violence to hostile debates, intimidation, and persecution³. Yet the negative connotation of cancel culture is expressed by a surrogate, warped version of legal process, which is chaotic and ritualized at the same time⁴. Cancel culture resembles a complex practice that should not be studied in isolation, but instead should be placed in a certain context. Cancel culture in its modern form facilitates two dangerous trends: the stigmatization of public figures and conversion of complex political and social processes into a moral plane. As a result, two crucial components of communication are incapacitated: dialogue and the possibility of critical

³ *Vogels E. A., Anderson M., Porteus M. and et al. (2021).*

⁴ *Dudenhoefer N. (2020).*

analysis in regards to a conflict. Under the aegis of cancel culture, an attempt to erase history, monuments, cultural norms, etc. is being made in order to conform to the expectations of today's social pressure. Cancel culture is a tendency, especially in cyberspace, upheld by groups of people when constructing fake identity markers within and outside such groups and when persecuting those who do not share or oppose such markers/values/political convictions; it is an attempt to remove such people from their public positions and platforms, which sometimes manifests itself in the effort to ostracize entire nations and states. In some cases, cancel culture takes the form of xenophobia, which is defined as fear of or aversion to individuals due to their nationality or even because they appear to be foreigners⁵. According to Mohsen Joshanloo, xenophobia is linked to cultural variables/values more than to social or economic factors⁶, hence the chapter analyzes the instances of xenophobia in the cultural sphere specifically. For example, the destruction of Russian culture on the Internet goes beyond the scope of cyberspace and takes the form of xenophobia – russophobia. In particular, in April 2022, Google Translate suggested that Russian users replace the phrase «dear Russians» with «dead Russians». The Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media demanded that Google take measures to rectify the issue, stating that it had detected an «extremist violation» in the service.

The issue of russophobia is explored in the works of such authors as Neil Robinson⁷, Giorgio Comai⁸, Krista Berglund⁹, Anatol Lieven¹⁰, Heikki Luostarinen¹¹, among others.

In the context of the analysis of russophobia, it would be appropriate to consider the phrase «culture war» as used by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and studied by the Professor of the University of Limerick (Ireland) Neil Robinson¹².

Considering the historical retrospective, it is worth noting that Putin made mention of «culture war» back in March 2012. In particular, he stressed that the threat to Russian moral and spiritual values comes not only from the

⁵ *McInnis E. M. (2021), pp. 26–42.*

⁶ *Joshanloo M. (2023), pp. 1–10*

⁷ *Robinson N. (2014); Robinson N. (2019), pp. 61–77.*

⁸ *Comai G. (2021).*

⁹ *Berglund K. (2012), pp. 233–365.*

¹⁰ *Lieven A. (2000), pp. 25–32.*

¹¹ *Luostarinen H. (1989), pp. 123–137.*

¹² *Robinson N. (2014).*

outside, but also lies within. «Attempts to influence the worldviews of entire peoples, the attempt to bend them to one's will, to instill one's system of values and understandings – this is an absolute reality, just like the struggle for mineral resources, which many countries, including our country, have encountered. And we know how the distortion of national, historical, and moral consciousness has led to the emergence of crises in entire states, leading to their weakening and ultimate decay, the deprivation of sovereignty and fratricidal wars.»¹³

In scientific discourse, such cultural values as individualism and collectivism have also been noted as correlators of xenophobia¹⁴.

The President of Russia signed the decree «On approving the foundations of the state policy for preserving and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values» on November 9, 2022 with the purpose of neutralizing potential threats by means of legal instruments. That decree was introduced as a means of constructing the framework of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values through the verbalization of intuitively comprehensive ideas. These moral guidelines form the worldview of citizens of Russia, are passed on from generation to generation, and make up the foundation of Russian civic identity and cultural space, as well as strengthen the civil unity. They represent the unique and distinctive manifestation of spiritual, historical, and cultural evolution of the multinational people of Russia. Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values include: life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, civic consciousness, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its destiny, high moral values, a strong family, constructive labor, precedence of spiritual over material, humanism, benevolence, justice, collectivism, mutual aid and respect, collective memory and intergenerational continuity, and the unity of the people of Russia. Simultaneously, Russian culture is evolving by not only absorbing the modern trends of Western, primarily European and American, culture, but also by turning to Russian and European culture of the past. Naturally, state borders do not serve as literal borders of a culture's history¹⁵. In that regard, Western culture is not simply being appropriated; but instead it is being processed and adjusted to the peculiarities of the Russian society and the distinct historical path of the Russian state.

¹³ *Meeting with representatives of the public on the issues of patriotic education of youth.* <http://news.kremlin.ru/news/16470>.

¹⁴ Leong C. H. and Ward C. (2006), pp. 799–810; Scheepers P., Gijsberts M. and Hello E. (2002), pp. 242–265.

¹⁵ Lugo-Ortiz A. (2007), p. 8062.

In the Russian-speaking online mass media space, the «cancellation of Russian culture» has become a derivative of the broader topic of cancel culture. When a problem arises, it will inevitably be a subject of discussion. Is the cancellation of Russian culture discussed in cyberspace? «Sistemniy Blok», the Internet publication themed around the implementation of digital technologies in culture, art, education, and society, has conducted a census on the number of times the phrases «cancel culture», «the cancellation of culture», and «the cancellation of Russian culture» have been mentioned in mass media and online searches throughout 2022. This data may help determine the level of concern (and, consequently, interest) regarding the cancellation of Russian culture among the Internet users based on search trends. The keyword statistics website Yandex Wordstat shows that in March 2022, the users of the Yandex search engine searched for the phrases «the cancellation of Russian culture» and «the cancellation of Russia» for the first time. That same month the amount of such searches tripled¹⁶. Ostensibly, that is due to the comments on Western ostracism made by the Russian President during the meeting with the laureates of awards for special achievements in the Arts and Culture on March 25, 2022¹⁷. Since March 2022, materials dedicated to the cancellation of Russian culture have started periodically appearing in the media. And on May 15, 2022 the Russian state television channel «Perviy Kanal» aired a report on the phenomenon of cancel culture and its alleged origin in the USA that showcases recent examples of the cancellation of Russian culture. The same month also saw the emergence of news stories that contained statements by famous Russian personalities (including Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' Kirill¹⁸, Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Medinsky¹⁹, the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theater named after Chekhov Konstantin Khabensky²⁰) on the cancellation of Russian culture. The publication of a variety of news materials in the media may have led to an increase of the number of reports on the subject. The uptick in reporting on this matter in June 2022 is most likely linked to it being discussed in various public events in Russia and

¹⁶ Kotikova E. (2022).

¹⁷ Meeting with the laureates of the 2021 Presidential Prizes for Young Cultural Works and for Works for Children and Youth (2022). <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68050>.

¹⁸ Patriarch Kirill called the “cancellation” of Russian culture in the West madness (2022). <https://www.interfax.ru/culture/841266>.

¹⁹ Medinsky commented on the process of “cancelation” of Russian culture in the West (2022). <https://www.tass.ru/kultura/14662957>.

²⁰ Khabensky declared the impossibility of canceling Russian culture (2022). <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/05/18/khabensky-otmena/>.

by a survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), which regularly conducts sociological and marketing research. In June 2022, SPIEF (St. Petersburg International Economic Forum) took place and was attended by more than 14,000 people from 130 countries. The forum hosted a session on «Cancel culture: unprecedented challenges for the media sphere. Information policy in the era of post-truth». VTsIOM published the results of the survey on the attitude of Russians to the policy of cancel culture in Western countries. According to the survey results, one in two Russians is concerned about the attempts of Western countries to remove Russian culture from public space (53 %). Women (57 %), pensioners (58 %), and those who prefer television to the Internet (61 %) are more predisposed to having such concerns. 43 % of responders do not express concern about the cancellation of Russian culture abroad, and 25 % of surveyees are not concerned at all. The idea of defending one's rights in the cultural sphere is popular among Russians. In order to do that, one should invite mass media (30 %) and Western public figures to advocate for protection of Russian culture (20 %), as well as create associations (16 %) and launch information campaigns (14 %) that are also tasked with the preservation of Russian culture. Petitions (9 %) and lawsuits (12 %) are seen as less effective. In other words, the only way to challenge the policy of cancel culture is through public outcry and discussion in the West. Three-quarters of Russians believe that countermeasures and the cancellation of Western culture in Russia are not necessary (73 %). This opinion is largely held by people with higher education (80 %) and residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg (80 %). One in five Russians (22 %) believes that sanctions against Western culture are necessary²¹. In July 2022, the number of news stories related to cancel culture from well-known Russian news agencies decreased, which led to the topic's drop in popularity. When the amount of searches is compared to the population of Russia (not to mention the proportion of Russian-speaking Internet users), it becomes clear that this amount is negligible. Based on this data, it would be inaccurate to call it «viral». However, the existence of such searches in relation to cancel culture is interesting in and of itself. Moreover, according to the researchers from the publication «Sistemnyy Blok», the phrase «canceling Russia» (which mostly directs to webpages on cancel culture broadly) was popular on Google Search between February 27 and March 5, 2022, right after the start of the Special Military Operation (SVO)

²¹ «Cancellation» of Russia and how to deal with it (2022). <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/otmena-rossii-i-kak-s-nei-borotsja>.

to provide military aid to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and seek the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine; but since mid-March the popularity of the search has sharply dropped. The news about cancellation are not always substantiated and are often followed by counterexamples. Canceling part of the worldwide cultural heritage may seem impossible, but famous Russians encounter it on a regular basis when working abroad or participating in international projects. However, as shown by search results and mass media, there is no global interest in the cancellation of Russian culture²². It can be assumed that canceling Russian culture will lead to an even bigger demand in the products of Russian culture and russophilia – a variation of xenophilia, defined as appreciation for everything Russian, the Russian people themselves, and Russia as a country. The term can be used in both the linguistic and cultural sense. The newfound interest in Russian classical literature (the works of I. Turgenev, F. Dostoevsky, L. Tolstoy, A. Chekhov) in the 19th century UK is a prominent example of russophilia, which gave an impetus to the growth of English culture. Translators Constance Garnett, George Calderon, and Robert A. Long played a huge role in that. Russian literature was further propagated by the literary critic Edward Garnett and the journalist and translator William Ralston, among others. The UK discovered a whole new world. The shift of Russia in British public consciousness in the beginning of 20th century resulted in Russia being seen as a country with an outstanding literature and artistic background²³.

The Russian 3D animated series «Masha and the Bear», created by the animation studio «Animaccord», could serve as a contemporary example of russophilia. All action in the series is primarily accompanied by pantomime (gestures and facial expressions), which can be easily perceived regardless of the language. This animated series seamlessly combines the motifs of Russian folk tales and modern realities. Its characters are easily recognizable. Russian researchers N. Perfilieva and K. Zhikulina researched the elements of Russian propaganda in the animated series «Masha and the Bear» and in the reviews by journalists and experts. According to them, the worldwide popularity of the series is explained not by advertising campaigns or explicit promotion by the Russian state, but by the appeal of the cartoon to both the Russian and international audiences²⁴. The show includes modernized archetypes of a Russian folk tale, reflecting the universal moral values through

²² Kotikova E. (2022).

²³ Krasavchenko T. N. (2020), p. 84.

²⁴ Perfilieva N. V. and Zhikulina K. P. (2019), pp. 164–178.

a Russian lens. Culture is the foundation of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding, which creates a sense of trust and solidarity between people. Within this context, Russian animation can act as a system-forming element of culture within the process of transition of the category «foe» to the category «friend», from russophobia to russophilia, and the establishment of a potential balance of these categories and processes. At the same time, animation, literature, and films can be used to manipulate public consciousness, which intensifies the xenophobic tendencies in a society, especially when their content is not inherently negative, yet their interpretation intentionally distorts the meaning. For example, there were several cases in Russia of manipulation of public consciousness with the intent of inciting extremism and hatred that were based on the Harry Potter film series, an adaptation of the popular book series by J. K. Rowling. Fall 2021 saw an emergence of interpretations of Harry Potter on TikTok, which used analogies to warp the meaning of the plot and influence the minds of teenagers. For instance, the President of Russia was equated to Lord Voldemort, the antagonist of the series who threatened the wizarding world, while Alexey Navalny was likened to Harry Potter, the protagonist who saves everyone. Here, the reverse process of the transition from the category «friend» to «foe» and from «russophilia» to «russophobia» can be observed. Later, it was refuted and Putin became akin to Albus Dumbledore, while Navalny resembled Gellert Grindelwald.

Therefore, instances of the cancellation of Russian culture, russophobia, and russophilia are covered within the context of cancel culture in cyberspace. At present russophobia is more prevalent than russophilia. The next chapter will showcase the manifestations of Russian culture being canceled using the author's cultural practice as an example.

3. The autobiographical narrative of the cancellation of Russian culture: the individual vs. the public.

An autobiographical narrative is a narrative that puts life events in a sequence with the help of plot, forming a structure of a subjective life path. The narrative creates and reflects a culture, traditions, values, and beliefs, and resembles a mirror that shows the image of what it means to be human. The autobiographical narrative also acts as an insightful lens, through which cultural experience and collective memory can be examined. At the same time, the cultural experience and collective memory are put in a certain context and are primarily conveyed through individual voices as if they were eyewitness testimony. This does not mean that the eyewitness speaks only of their memory, because as made clear by M. Halbwachs, people usually

acquire memories in society. What is more, they remember, identify, and arrange their memory in society as well²⁵. Collective memory can be best understood within the frame of the individual and the social combined, when a person's biography serves as an illustration of society in its heterogeneity and complexity. It is worth noting that behind this explicit memory technology lie gendered interpretation framework and acts of transfer, as described by P. Connerton²⁶, which depend on standard ethnocultural codes and models. As a further matter, experience, as well as memories and their transfer, are also gendered and included in this context. Identity – whether individual or cultural – becomes history that flows from the past to the present and future, links an individual to a group, and is built on the basis of gender and associated identity markers²⁷.

Within the purview of the topic under consideration, the facts and events related to cancel culture and ethnic xenophobia from the author's life were analyzed. In this part of the chapter, the autobiographical narrative of the cancellation of Russian culture is presented from a first-person perspective.

It is important to clarify that, in addition to scientific and teaching work in the fields of law and culture/art, I am an artist who regularly participates in exhibits. In all fairness, I will reflect upon the facts and events that fit into the issue of cancel culture, as I would not have taken notice of them in my biography had I not conducted this research.

The main instance is related to a cloud platform that hosted my website with my art portfolio with photographs of my paintings and information about me. I was «canceled» as an artist online because of my nationality. I got an email, saying that «due to the current situation, from March 7, 2022, Wix (*author's note*: a website builder) has suspended its premium services to the users in Russia or those paying for them in Rubles. This means your premium account cannot be renewed.» However, this was preceded by other instances of discrimination, and in some cases ethnic xenophobia. In April 2014, Paul Walsh, a Facebook user from Vietnam who was born in Odessa, USA, left a comment under a photo of my painting *To Remember* (Figure 1), saying «DAMN RUSSIANS!» I can assume that such a reaction is most likely due to the difference in interpretation. In this regard, it is necessary to understand and to search for the meaning behind and beyond the signs and the symbols on the canvas: what was the author's intention and how should it be interpreted?

²⁵ Halbwachs M. (1950).

²⁶ Connerton P. (1989), p. 39.

²⁷ Rozhdestvenskaya E. Yu. (2012), p. 42.



Figure 1. Yu. Erokhina *To Remember*. 2013

The idea of the painting *To Remember* (Figure 1) is related to the poem *Requiem* (1962) by Robert Rozhdestvenskiy, the first recipient of the «Golden Wreath» award at the Struga Poetry Evenings Festival (held in Struga, North Macedonia). This is a poem about those who gave their life for freedom and peace. The author raises the problem of remembrance and dares the readers to be worthy of the feat of the World War 2 soldiers. The painting *To Remember* (Figure 1) traces the narrative of pain, sorrow, universal tragedy, and the memory of war. The names of my paintings always serve as keys to decoding the symbolism and meaning behind my works. The background of the painting *To Remember* (Figure 1) resembles a vintage military uniform, but the color scheme (a symbiosis of various shades of green) is done in the style of camouflage. In a way, this color palette fuses the past and the present, absorbing the memory of wars and armed conflicts.

Red in its purest form is used to evoke negative emotions and anxiety. It is red calico – the color of blood and of the Soviet flag. At the top and in the middle of the canvas, the uniform has a hole with blood coming out. This is the blood of the victims of the war that also symbolizes rebirth, strength, and fortitude and can heal people from the «leprosy» of lies and hatred. The painting also features a number of items. The first thing that

catches the eye is the binoculars in a case. Binoculars, akin to a spyglass, symbolize insightfulness and perception. The open case with the binoculars signifies the importance of remembering the war and its victims without requiring any special insight. Since the case is open, it is time to remind ourselves of the past events in order to reassess history and prevent the tragedies that befell our ancestors in the future.

The second item is a military variant of the *ushanka*, the Russian winter headwear with earflaps. With the flaps open, it resembles a bird with wings and a tail. Bird is a personification of the human soul. The viewer might perceive it as memories involving a particular person or a collective image of a soldier who shed blood for peace and freedom of the future generations.

The third item is an overturned glass and a slice of bread. Russian culture has a lot of memorial traditions, one of them being the sharing of a meal with the spirit of the deceased. The deceased, before departing for the afterlife, shares a memorial meal with their loved ones and says goodbye to life. A glass of vodka covered by a slice of bread is placed on the table, so that families can honor the memory of the deceased. This tradition is akin to a thin thread that connects the living and the dead. A person and their soul are alive as long as they are still remembered. The painting (Figure 1) features an overturned glass because someone or something knocked it over. Red spots on the slice of bread resemble salmon caviar rather than blood, meaning that the bread is not intended to honor the dead. The meal is meant to be a joyous occasion. Therefore, the potential loss of traditions and the national memory of the war and its fallen heroes is implied, which should not be allowed to happen in the future.

The ribbon on top of the *ushanka* and the uniform should also be noted. On December 7, 1769, the Empress of Russia Catherine II established the highest military award of the Russian Empire, awarded for personal courage demonstrated on the battlefield – The Order of the Holy Great Martyr and Victorious Saint George (the Order of St. George). It was to be worn on a «silk ribbon with three black and two yellow stripes» that came to be known as the Ribbon of St. George. In various periods of time, the Russian Emperors awarded the Order of St. George for military exploits to other heads of state, including the Austrian General Prince Alexander of Hesse, King and Queen of Kingdom of the Two Sicilies Francis II and Maria Sophie Amalie, the Prussian king Wilhelm I, and the crown prince Frederick William of Prussia, among others. On March 2, 1992, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation issued a decree «On the state awards of the Russian

Federation» No. 2424-I that reinstituted the Russian military Order of the Holy Great Martyr and Victorious Saint George and the insignia of the Order of the St. George Cross. Spring 2005 saw the first public campaign «The Ribbon of St. George» on the streets of Russian cities. It originated spontaneously as part of an Internet project «Our Victory», aimed at publishing stories and photographs of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. «The Ribbon of St. George» has become a symbol of solemn events and annual meetings with the veterans of the war in many cities of Russia and later in the USA, Israel, Italy, Austria, Ukraine, etc. This is a clear example of russophilia. The ban on wearing and public display of the Ribbon of St. George, enforced in 2022 in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Georgia, and some German states and in 2017 in Ukraine, is not an example of russophobia, but xenophobia, as this tradition had been recognized worldwide and spread to many countries of the world. Obviously, I was taken aback by Paul Walsh's comment «DAMN RUSSIANS!», but in all fairness, it was an isolated case amidst the overwhelming international positive feedback. At the same time, I noticed the contrast in the perception of symbolism behind the painting, which is why I submitted this artwork instead of the one I originally intended to put forward to the international Art Week in Italy (Palazzo Priuli-Bon art gallery, San Stae 1979, Santa Croce, Venezia). In August 2014, I was informed by the event organizers that the painting *To Remember* (Figure 1) was well-received and took 2nd place in the category «Experimental Painting» under the nomination «Abstract Painting».

The trend towards the cancellation of Russian culture and expression of russophobia continues to take shape and has expanded beyond isolated cases. Namely, a notable amount of art galleries have stated that they would no longer work with Russian artists despite the high quality of my works of art and their artistic value. In Copenhagen, I was openly told that I, among other artists from Russia, would not be contacted due to the current political situation. And the London art galleries are not further interested in any forms of Russian art or culture, despite the large number of requests from ordinary citizens to hold an exhibition.

A recent incident related to my art being canceled happened in Russia this time. In the fall of 2022, I was advised not to feature the painting *The Island of Childhood* (Figure 2) at my personal exhibition due to it depicting a Z (this sign will be covered in detail in the following part of the chapter), which could cause «undue attention and provocation». The argument that I created the artwork back in 2017 did not make the organizers of the exhibition

change their minds. This case demonstrates a warped perception of a symbol, when the audience offers their own interpretation of the image, disregarding its context and time of creation.



Figure 2. Yu. Erokhina The Island of Childhood. 2017

As an artist, I encode certain meanings in symbols when I am working on a painting. The zigzag-shaped path in the sea, as depicted in the image in the form of a Z, has its own symbolic meaning, which can have multiple interpretations. The boat is portrayed at the beginning of its designated path, meaning it is moving from the past through the present and to the future. Or it is already at the end of its journey, thus giving a sense of movement from the present to the past. That raises the question of «What did the traveler forget in the past? What unresolved questions stayed there? And what will happen once the traveler finds answers to those questions?» The zigzag-shaped path resembles a constant cycle of movement. The Z-sign is the letter Z (zemlya – «Earth») of the Old Cyrillic alphabet. It symbolizes protection from the malevolent forces. Zemlya («The Earth») as a universal structure and a form of life for all beings was created by God. The shape of the letter is also symbolic: the upper line marks the Sky, the lower line marks the Earth, and the diagonal line crosses out the space between Heaven and the Earth, thus preventing the malevolent forces from entering. At times, the

letter Z (zemlya – «Earth») was used to mean «land», «country», «people» or «human body». In the painting, there are no people visible on the moving boat, which is why it can be assumed that someone's soul was given a chance to travel through time and space. The purpose of that journey is only known to the traveler. When interpreting the meaning of the letter Z as the «human body», the boat can be considered the traveler's soul whose path in the Universe is predetermined by the God Almighty, though the ultimate decision rests with the person making it.

When interpreting the painting, it is important to note the energy and the magic of the boat. The boat is akin to an open cradle, being more personal and sentimental than a sailboat or a longboat. It is a symbol of safety and shelter, art and dream, nature and tranquility, as well as happiness, magic, and soul. When looking at life as a dangerous adventure, a boat symbolizes sanctuary. It can be compared to a sacred island. The boat and the island oppose the shapeless and hostile sea. The sea is a wide open shining surface that hides dark, mysterious depths within its bowels – a testament to infinity. To embark on a journey on a boat is a symbolical analogy to entering one's subconscious, as the sea depths are reminiscent of our minds. Vivid tones of turquoise and azure have a positive aura in relation to the painting itself. Many people associate azure with the rapid flow of electricity. Similar reliefs of island clusters suggest that even if the flow of time is different, the past, present, and future are equally subject to its destructive consequences. The golden grains of sand (a semblance to hourglass), as illustrated in the picture, are a metaphor of the passage of time.

Therefore, the autobiographical method allowed to establish that ethnic xenophobia became a trend around 2014 and has intensified since 2016, finally solidifying in the shape of the cancellation of Russian culture in 2022, which led to the «cancellation» of individuals solely on the basis of their nationality.

4. The semiotic and legal analysis of the new Russian symbols «Z» and «V».

Using the semiotic method, the primary and secondary meanings of the new symbols «Z» and «V», widespread in Russian culture, will be analyzed. The mechanisms of national security in cyberspace are demonstrated through the encoding and decoding of the «Z» and «V» symbols. They act as identifiers within the process of transition from the category of «friend» to the category of «foe» and, subsequently, as markers of xenophilia and xenophobia. G. Hofstede states that culture is «the collective programming

of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.»²⁸. Culture manifests itself in layers. When analyzing the emergence of new symbols in Russian culture, it is advisable to distinguish between the three fundamental layers through which culture is expressed. These include: a) artifacts and creations, b) values, and c) basic assumptions²⁹.

The primary meaning of the symbols «Z» and «V» is as follows. The «Z» symbol is an abbreviation for the phrases «За победу» («For victory», Figure 3), «Задача будет выполнена» («The task will be completed»), and «За нами правда!» («The truth is on our side»). While the «V» symbol stands for «Сила V правде» («Power is in truth»).

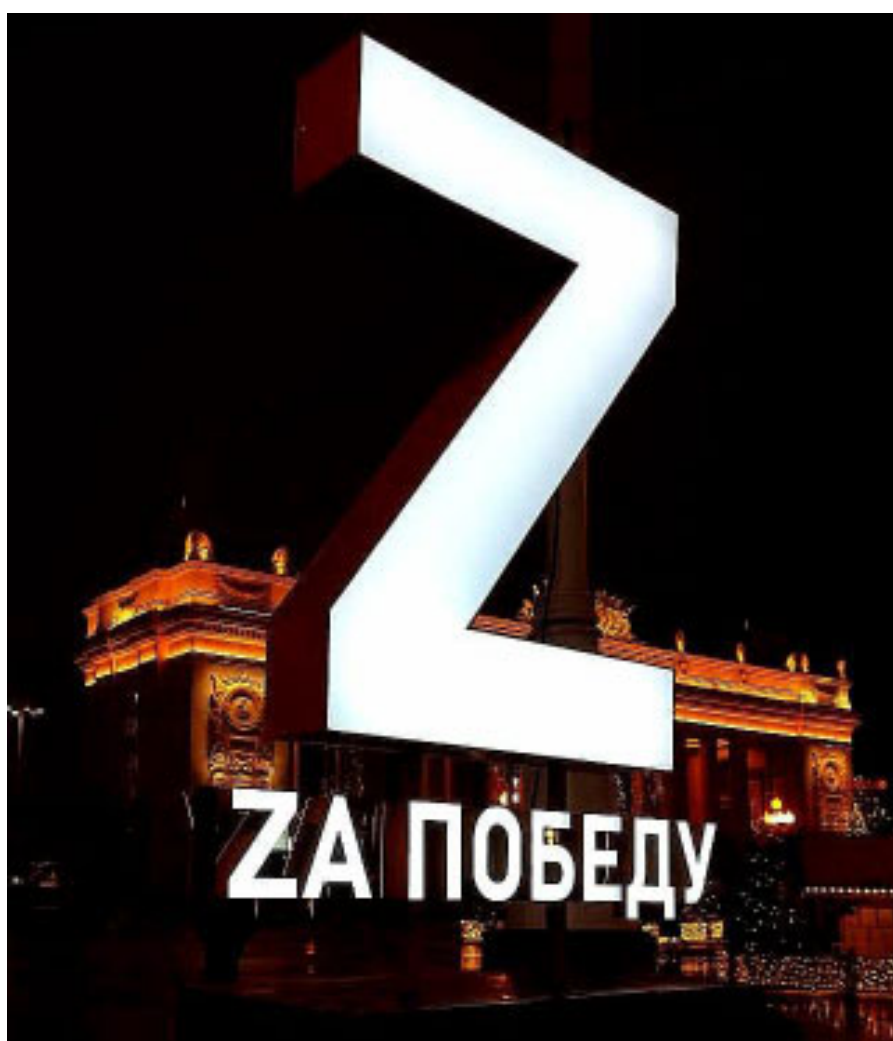


Figure 3. Photo by Yu. Erokhina (taken on January 1, 2023 near the Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure in the city of Moscow for this publication)

²⁸ Hofstede G. (1991), p. 5.

²⁹ Schein E. (1990), p. 111.

Currently, different interpretations can be attributed to the signs «Z» and «V» depending on the evaluation, conducted on the basis of either the Latin or Cyrillic script. First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that the letter «Z» is called «zemlya» («Earth») and the letter «V» is called «Izhitsa» («movement») in the Cyrillic script. Nowadays, «V» is mainly perceived as the victory sign (Victoria/Victory). Secondly, the use of the symbols «Z» and «V» as tactical markings on military vehicles is sometimes explained as identifying marks for the Russian army groups: «Z» for the Western Military District (ZVO) and «V» for the Eastern Military District (VVO). Their secondary meaning is an acquired one: the signs «Z» and «V» have become the unofficial symbols of public support for the Russian army and gained popularity after the start of the Special Military Operation (SVO) to provide military aid to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in repelling aggression from the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) and seek the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine.

When interpreting the «V» symbol, which means «Сила V правде» («Power is in truth»), an allusion to the *Brat* comics series can be traced. The *Brat* comics series, compiled in the book *Brat. 25 Years*³⁰, is based on the Russian film duology *Brat* that targets a wide demographic and covers the lives of the characters before and after the events of the films *Brat* (1997) and *Brat 2* (2000), which were directed by Alexey Balabanov. The irrational communicative nature of the comic series and films can be found in its symbols that emerge from the depths of memory and are characterized by extreme subjectivity and the highest degree of involvement in the world of fiction, leading to the absence of imposed rationality that is based on objectivity, functionality, and informativity. The new connotation behind the «V» symbol can be observed in regards to the context of the films. The semantics behind the current interpretation of the expression «Сила V правде» («Power is in truth») is attributed to the legendary monologue of the character of Danila in the film *Brat 2*. «American, what's your power? Is it really money? My brother says it's money. You've got lots of money – so what? **Truth is a real power.** Whoever is right is strong. You cheated on a man and took away his money. Did it make you stronger? No, it did not, 'cause you are not right, and the person you cheated on is. **That means he's stronger.** Right?»

As a phenomenon of mass culture³¹, comic books are rich material for social, legal, and semiotic analysis. Classic Western comics and Japanese

³⁰ Desyatnikova E., Zamsky A., Nekrasov Yu. and et al. (2022).

³¹ Belyaev D. A. (2013), pp. 35–42; Erokhina T. I. and Badil K. K. (2017), pp. 359–363; Fetisova T. A. (2019), pp. 174–192.

manga have long been providing entertainment and comfort, sometimes even resembling a pillar of stability in people's lives. Although there are many different variations of manga, it is mostly defined by its black and white color palette and exaggerated facial expressions. Russian comics have combined the leading art styles and narrative devices of Western and Eastern cultures alongside Russian cultural features. This case demonstrates another advantage of xenophilia – the ability to revive and enhance tradition.

The main character of the comic book *Brat. 25 Years*, Danila Bagrov, is also the protagonist of the films *Brat* and *Brat 2*. Bagrov is a veteran of the First Chechen War, who did compulsory military service. What is «truth» and the so-called «Bagrov's truth»? Decoding the color scheme of the films *Brat* and *Brat 2* and the comic book *Brat. 25 Years* and revisiting their message can help find answers to those questions. The color palette in the comic book is reminiscent of film photographs as found in an old family album that depicts the collective memories of Russian society in the 1990s. The pictures are akin to still frames from a film which narrative was suddenly interrupted. They offer hints of various degrees of explicitness and allow the audience to develop the plot according to their own imagination, interpretation, and memory. An inevitable clash between the methodological and gnoseological complications occurs when studying color. Color is a complex cultural construct, observed as a semiotic resource or a multifunctional method of creating signs that are localized to culture. The variation of interpretation raises a logical question on the objectivity of knowledge obtained with its help. In this case, subjectivism can be avoided by matching the meaning behind the color scheme with the script.

There are multiple stages to this decoding.

The expressive stage of decoding conveys and evokes emotion and is implemented via various shades of green, related to the past of the main characters. The story *Where Did You Serve?* showcases the artistic device of retrospection, i.e. the act of revisiting the hypothetical past of Danila Bagrov, and is color-coded green with some additions of red to symbolize blood. Green is also featured in other stories and ranges from grayish-yellow «khaki» to greenish-brown «army green», which are both used in military uniform for camouflage purposes.

Some aspects of gnoseological nature should be noted. On the one hand, an additional visualization of the images of the past can be observed. The plot concept of the story is envisioned by graphic images that make it animated and believable. On the other hand, comics can disorient the reader to some

extent when portraying past events in fiction. Such recreation of past events cannot be considered artistically analogous to the original story. The comic book introduces the character of Danila Bagrov by relating the events of his life in the army. His character arc is deeply rooted in the war, with the main tenets of «truth» being patriotism, homeland, heroism, friendship. The war operates on the code of honor rather than laws of peace time. Therefore, the characteristics that convey and evolve emotions by using the color green are identified at this stage of decoding. Danila Bagrov's positive and negative emotions and motives either stay within social and cultural norms or go beyond legal prescriptions, but their origin always lies in his military past.

The symbolic stage indicates an object, phenomenon or entity and is expressed through the juxtaposition and interaction of black and white and is connected with the future of the main characters. The future is depicted as a black-and-white coloring book, which color scheme changes depending on how the plot unfolds. Danila Bagrov can be considered a cultural substratum and he becomes a symbol of justice when he inevitably dies in all versions of the future. «When a person dies, it pales. His face and body lose color in the fading light of his life. Spiritless matter of a dead body does not have a color emission.»³². The correlation of the meaning behind white put forward by the story and the interpretation of white by J. Jarman is apparent, «<...> to wear white you cannot mix with the crowd, white is a lonely colour. It repels the unwashed, has a touch of paranoia, what are we shutting out? It takes hard work whitewashing.»³³. The phrase «It takes hard work whitewashing» gains a symbolic meaning and acquires new sense when viewed through the context of the actions of the characters and the modern interpretation of the expression «Сила V правде» («Power is in truth»). The symbolic stage of decoding lies in the relationship between black and white, representing the future of the protagonists. The symbolic meaning is understood through the category of «justice», including the legal definition of the term.

In spite of this, administrative cases on discrediting of the Russian Armed Forces (Article 20.3.3 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses) have started to appear concurrently with the widespread use of the «Z» and «V» symbols against the people who voiced their disapproval of the symbols or tried to remove them in public spaces. As of January 2023, the website of the state information system «Justice»

³² Itten I. (2013), p. 29.

³³ Jarman D. (2017), p. 33.

lists only cases with corresponding court documents. In total, there have been 2,751 administrative cases under Article 20.3.3 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses, featuring 184 cases on the criticism or subverted use of the letters «Z» and «V». The arguments made by courts when assessing cases and passing judgment within the frame of the Russian legal system are as follows.

Actions that are subject to legal assessment:

- posts and messages on social media that contain criticism and negative statements on the use of the letters «Z» and «V», as well as their equivocation to the nazi symbolics;
- attempts to remove or in some way damage the stickers or images of the letters «Z» and «V» in public;
- graffiti and writing that portrays the symbols «Z» and «V» in negative light;
- posters containing «Z» and «V» during protests and demonstrations against the special military operation.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, courts impose fines. Some of them were terminated (e.g. due to formalities when courts returned the police report to address discrepancies). One of such cases was being investigated in Leningrad Oblast. According to the court ruling, a resident of the region removed the Russian flag with the «Z» letter and the slogan «Своих не бросаем» («We don't abandon our own») on it from the building of a non-profit organization and burned it. The court terminated the proceedings, since a criminal case under Article 329 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (Outrages upon the National Emblem of the Russian Federation, or the State Flag of the Russian Federation) had already been opened.

In most cases, courts have imposed fines on the basis of administrative violations, police reports, testimonies of individuals charged with administrative offenses, etc. Maximum fine is 50,000 Rubles³⁴. According to court rulings, the letter «Z» signifies a «national» and «generally accepted» symbol of the special military operation. Therefore, any attempt to remove or deface the symbol or criticism of its use is recognized by the law as discreditation of the Russian Armed Forces. Several court rulings included a detailed analysis of what can be considered discreditation in accordance with Article 20.3.3 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative

³⁴ *Why do Russian courts consider criticism of Z and V as discrediting the army?* <https://mmdc.ru/news-div/pochemu-rossijskie-sudy-schitayut-kritiku-z-i-v-diskreditaczej-armii/>.

Offenses. For example, the ruling of the Surgut City Court (of Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug) dated March 10, 2022 states:

- the objective side of offense in question can be formed by any public action, including those that produce information aimed at discrediting the Russian Armed Forces, in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, accessible to wide audiences, including publication in mass media;

- discreditation is a deliberate action aimed at undermining the authority, image, and trust in someone, as well as belittling their dignity and authority;

- discreditation can be expressed by means of such speaking tactics as blaming, ridiculing, fomenting negative factors, insults, labeling, and derogatory comparisons.

the purpose of the action is to undermine the dignity and authority of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the context of their participation in the special military operation aimed at protecting the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens and maintaining international peace and security³⁵.

Similar wording can be found in other court rulings in Russia.

At the same time, the term «discreditation» is considered to be legal by law and no special knowledge is required to determine whether one's actions are discrediting the Russian Armed Forces or not. Although in some cases, social media posts can be subjected to a linguistic examination. The specific circumstances of the administrative offense are subject to an evaluation in accordance with the general rules of issuing administrative penalty, which are based on the principles of fairness, proportionality, and individualization of punishment.

For instance, the ruling of the Volsky District Court of Saratov Oblast dated May 17, 2022 states that, regarding part 1 of Article 20.3.3 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses, when evaluating whether one's actions are discrediting the Russian Armed Forces, it is necessary to bear in mind that the verdict is in the providence of the judge that is working on the case, since the matter of the signs of discreditation requires legal assessment and suitable qualification³⁶.

March 2022 saw amendments to Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code of Russia on public actions that discredit the actions of the Russian Armed Forces aimed at protecting the interests of the Russian Federation and its

³⁵ Administrative offense case 5-2557/2022. <https://sudrf.ru/regular/court/>

³⁶ Administrative offense case 5-2557/2022. <https://sudrf.ru/regular/court/>

citizens and maintaining international peace and security. The maximum penalty that amounts to up to 1,000,000 Rubles, or a salary, or any other form of income of the convicted for a period of three to five years, or imprisonment for up to five years and disqualification from engaging in certain professions or activities for the same period. As of writing, there are no case laws regarding criminal offenses in this category.

The online use of the letter «Z» in logos was discontinued by some global companies. According to their representatives, the letter used separately from the name of the organization or its logo «can be misinterpreted». Future developments should be considered so as to avoid unwanted connotations when using this letter in advertising.

5. Conclusion.

The flow of information in cyberspace is being overhauled. The historical significance of the Internet in terms of its impact on human civilization is comparable to the introduction of book printing in the 15th-16th centuries. Cyberspace influences global cultural trends by accumulating numerous traditions of various peoples and nationalities. At the same time, the Internet is reinforcing cultural hegemony, i.e. the domination or rule of one social group over the other, maintained through ideological, religious, cultural or even historical means. The fact that culture develops alongside civilization, which helps realize its creative potential and humanistic values, is not taken into account. Cancel culture is a tendency, especially in cyberspace, upheld by groups of people when constructing fake identity markers within and outside such groups and when persecuting those who do not share or oppose such markers/values/political convictions; it is an attempt to ostracize entire nations and states. In some cases, cancel culture takes the form of xenophobia, which is defined as fear of or aversion to individuals due to their nationality. Xenophobia is linked to cultural variables, which are expressed by traditional spiritual and moral values.

The study has concluded that the cancellation of Russian culture is an issue present in cyberspace. Search data and media reports do not indicate any interest in the cancellation of Russian culture by Russian- and English-speaking Internet users alike. However, the topic of the cancellation of Russian culture became popular on various search engines shortly after the start of the Special Military Operation (SVO) to provide military aid to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in repelling aggression from the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) and seek the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine; though it sharply dropped later on. It can be assumed that canceling Russian culture will lead to an even bigger demand

in the products of Russian culture. Russophilia – a variation of xenophilia, defined as appreciation for everything Russian, the Russian people themselves, and Russia as a country – will continue to spread.

The autobiographical method allowed to establish that the tendency towards ethnic xenophobia exists and is expressed in the «cancellation» of individuals solely on the basis of their nationality.

The semiotic method is used to identify the primary and secondary meanings of the new symbols «Z» and «V» utilized in Russian cultural space. They act as identifiers within the process of transition from the category of «friend» to the category of «foe» and, subsequently, as markers of xenophilia and xenophobia. The mechanisms of national security in cyberspace are demonstrated through the encoding and decoding of the «Z» and «V» symbols. The symbols of the special military operation acts as triggers for its opponents on the informational and psychological front. Nowadays, the battles are fought with images, not just missiles. The primary meaning of the symbols «Z» and «V» as tactical markings on military vehicles is explained as identifying marks for the Russian army groups: «Z» for the Western Military District (ZVO) and «V» for the Eastern Military District (VVO). Their secondary meaning is an acquired one: the signs «Z» and «V» have become the unofficial symbols of public support for the Russian army after the start of the special military operation. When interpreting the «V» symbol, which means «Сила V правде» («Power is in truth»), an allusion to the *Brat* comics series, based on the eponymous film duology, can be traced. In this regard, two stages of decoding are distinguished: 1) the expressive stage that conveys and evokes emotion and is implemented via various shades of green, related to the past of the main characters; 2) the symbolic stage that indicates an object, phenomenon or entity and is expressed through the juxtaposition and interaction of black and white and is connected with the future of the main characters.

In Russian legal practice, administrative cases on discrediting of the Russian Armed Forces (Article 20.3.3 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses) have started to appear against the people who voiced their disapproval of the symbols «Z» and «V» or tried to damage state, public, and private property that bears the images of the symbols as a result of acts of vandalism.

Within the framework of this scientific article, a preliminary conclusion based on the empirical generalization of the available material has been made. Since information flows in cyberspace change at tremendous speeds, the study of the markers «friend» and «foe» within the context of ethnic xenophobia and xenophilia and their relation to cancel culture and the cancellation of Russian culture in particular should be continued.

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CANCEL CULTURE: XENOPHOBIA AND XENOPHILIA ONLINE USING RUSSIA AS AN EXAMPLE

Developing Internet communication technologies are expanding the audience of both global culture broadly as well as Russian culture in particular. The world is conceptualized as multicultural and the cyberspace appears to be mosaic, thus indicating the idea of preserving and encouraging cultural diversity that is contributing to the spiritual enrichment of society. At the same time, digital technologies can have a negative impact by means of altering cultural values and restructuring the system of their coding. To be more specific, it leads to a possibility of an interpretation of a fact being distorted, which is why this article analyzes the instances of xenophobia online and beyond. However, in order to objectify the scientific knowledge on the topic of xenophobia, it would be remiss not to examine xenophilia. Xenophobia and xenophilia are two contrasting phenomena that can have a negative effect on human consciousness, harmful both for the one espousing them and the society as a whole. It is important to identify the mechanisms of their interaction, find a potential balance between them, and determine to what extent «foe» becomes «friend» as a result of cultural adaptation. In this regard, the paper deals with the phenomenon of the cancellation of Russian culture as a manifestation of ethnic xenophobia online and offline. An autobiographical method of research is applied when analyzing the instances of xenophobia directed towards the author in her career as an artist with the purpose of objectification of knowledge on the topic of the cancellation of Russian culture. The semiotic method is used to identify the primary and secondary meanings of the new symbols «Z» and «V» utilized in Russian cultural space. The article also analyzes Russian legal practice and evaluates the prospects of counteracting xenophobia.

Keywords: Cancel culture, Cyberhate, Xenophobia, Xenophilia, Russophobia, Russophilia.

Ерохина Юлия Владимировна

кандидат юридических наук,
доцент, доцент кафедры теории
и истории государства и права
юридического факультета
ФГБОУ ВО «Государственный
академический университет
гуманитарных наук»

РФ, г. Москва

E-mail: yulia-erohina@yandex.ru

Erokhina Yu.

PhD in Law, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor of the
Department of Theory and
History of State and Law of
Faculty of Law of the State
Academic University for the
Humanities

Russia, Moscow

E-mail: yulia-erohina@yandex.ru

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ФГБОУ ВО «Донецкий государственный университет»,
ул. Университетская, 24, 283001, г. Донецк
Тел.: +7(949) 36-707-35
E-mail: redact@donnu.ru
URL: <http://donnu.ru/vestnikE>

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